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ABSTRACT

Although the study of self-selected ethnic labels may aid scientists in their understanding of an ethnic group, the uncoordinated use of ethnic labels applied by social scientists and others can result in confusion and misinformation. A literature review yields a plethora of terms used to refer to Mexican Americans. Terms currently popular are Hispanic, Chicano, Mexicano, and Mexican American. One source of data for social scientists has been the government census which has used a variety of identification and classification techniques including objective and/or subjective methods of defining ethnic populations. Many existing terms are too broad or are found to be undesirable by the population to whom the term is applied. The term Hispanic ignores national boundaries. The popular term Chicano refers to a population Mexican Americans perceive as being more ethnocentric, anti-establishment and politically active, but is often used by social scientists without those distinctions. The term Mexican American is most applicable when referring to Americans with ancestral ties to Mexico as it is both descriptive and consistent with terminology presently employed to identify other ethnic groups. Social scientists engaged in Mexican American studies must agree on terminology in order to facilitate comparisons and the accumulation of knowledge. (PM)

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MEXICAN AMERICANS: LABELING AND MISLABELING

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December 7, 1984

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MEXICAN AMERICANS: LABELING AND MISLABELING

Ethnic labels may be self-selected or they may be applied by others. Selection of ethnic labels is influenced by such considerations as socio-demographic traits (i.e., sex, age, socioeconomic status, generation, region), psychological dimensions (i.e., feelings of hostility or contentment, degree of conformity, need for acceptance or belonging), situational factors (i.e., whether speaking Spanish or English, interacting with insiders or outsiders, context of cooperation or confrontation) and institutional conditions (i.e., policy makers responses to subpopulations). Consequently, a variety of labels may be expected. Variation of self-selected terms may be indicative of important variations among ethnic members. The specific terms selected may say much about the individuals themselves. This is because, as Anselm Strauss stated (1959) almost a quarter century ago, names which are voluntarily adopted reveal something of the individual's self-image. Thus, continuing use of a variety of self-selected ethnic labels may aid scientists in their study and understanding of an ethnic group.

Such is not the case, however, of a variety of ethnic labels applied by social scientists. Social sciences advance as a result of a team effort. As in all team efforts, advancement is directly related to the degree of coordination and cooperation exhibited between the members. In the last two decades there has been a dramatic increase in the number of studies which have been devoted to the nation's second largest and fastest growing ethnic minority--Mexican Americans. No longer are they the unknown people of the southwest. Today they are recognized as the largest segment of the increasingly important Hispanic population. Because of their growing size and concommitant political, economic and social im-

portance there will be even greater attention given them in the future. Yet despite the recent show of concern and increase of information available, the study of Mexican Americans is still very problematic. There appears to be a serious lack of coordination among social scientists who are studying them. Nowhere is this more evident than in the most basic area of labeling. Even a cursory review of the literature will reveal that there is a plethora of terms used by social scientists and others to refer to Mexican Americans. Ignoring those terms which were common even a couple of decades ago, such as Latin American, Latino, Spanish-speaking, Spanish-surnamed and Spanish American, there is still a variety in use today. The more common labels currently utilized include Hispanic, Chicano, Mexicano and Mexican American.

Over the years, one of the major sources of data available to social scientists has been the government census. Symptomatically, however, there has been a great deal of change and confusion demonstrated in the government's terminology and classification of Mexican Americans. The problem of conceptually defining the Mexican American population in the census data has been well documented by Hernandez et al (1973). Two generic ways of defining ethnic populations have been utilized: the use of objective criterion, such as a surname, place of origin or primary language used, and/or subjective criterion such as self-identification with a cultural, national or ethnic group. Complications have been added by changing criteria and/or changing terminology. For example, prior to 1930 Mexican Americans were generally classified as white, but in the 1930 census they were classified as "other races" and termed Mexicans. This classification was short-lived, and in 1940 they were again classified as white. In the 1950 census Mexican Americans continued to be classified as white, unless clearly a member of an Indian or other non-white race.

There was an important change made in 1960. Whereas previously all racial classifications were made by the census enumerator based on personal observation, in 1960 race was determined by self-classification of the respondent. If respondents failed to indicate race but did indicate Mexican birth or ancestry, they were classified as white in the editing process. In 1970 the racial classification remained unchanged but Mexican Americans were designated persons of Spanish heritage or Spanish surname. The 1980 census spoke of them as of Spanish origin, and 56 percent classified themselves as white while the remainder chose black (2.7 percent), Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, Asian or Pacific islander (1.3 percent), or "other" (40 percent). This was a dramatic change from the previous census when 93.3 percent selected white.

Such a situation is unfortunate, but is mirrored among the social scientists themselves who also employ a wide variety of ethnic designations. A variety in terminology makes comparisons and the accumulation of scientific knowledge based on diverse studies or sources of data a difficult and sometimes hazardous undertaking. It is not always clear to what specific ethnic group or groups the studies refer. When different investigators use different ethnic labels, such as Hispanic and Chicano, it is unclear whether the groups in question are the same. Thus, it is problematic to compare the findings or to use the data to build a body of knowledge. Furthermore, some terms are too broad by their very definition or nature. For example, the term Hispanic, which is currently favored by many people, includes such diverse groups as Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Venezuelans and Mexican Americans. It is not limited to a single racial, national or ethnic group. Thus, not only are people of different races and nationalities lumped together, but so too are foreign and native born individuals and groups.

This situation motivated Campa (1979) to comment on the "problem of nomenclature" and the inappropriateness or incorrectness of many of the specific labels used. He stated, "The varied terminology now in use is often misleading, because it is based on capricious ideas clouded by prejudice and confused by mistaken notions of race and nationality. Thus many of the names applied to the millions of Americans who speak Spanish in the Southwest express an attitude of mind or a political persuasion rather than a clear concept of race, culture, and/or nationality" (1979: 3). More recently, the situation found in census data has caused the social scientists Garcia and Maldonado (1982) to make a plea for greater specificity when referring to Mexican Americans. Their study of census data, comparing Hispanics of Mexican origin to Hispanics of non-Mexican origin, indicate the existence of important differences among the various Hispanic nationalities. In addition to nationality, generation and nativity were found to be important variables. Unfortunately, these too are ignored by the label Hispanic.

A term which has found favor among many social scientists is Chicano. However, the appropriate reference of this term may be even more difficult to assess than Hispanic. There are several reasons why the use of Chicano as a general term to refer to people of Mexican descent is undesirable. First, not only may this label refer to other Hispanics, but, according to some, may even refer to non-Hispanics (see De Leon, 1972). Second, relatively few Mexican Americans accept this label (Frisbe, 1973; Lampe, 1977; San Antonio Light, 1982), and some actively oppose its use in reference to themselves (Miller, 1976). Third, there are important social and psychological differences between those Mexican Americans who accept the label and those who do not (Trujillo, 1973; Lampe, 1980).

It is this last point which, for social scientists, may be the most important because it appears to be the least recognized. Relatively few social scientists make a distinction between Mexican Americans and Chicanos. Those that do have noted some important differences. Among the differences recorded are the following:

Differences in self-image, orientation and reference group, with Chicanos appearing to be Mexican Americans who have a non-Anglo image of themselves and who are more concerned with group than individual advancement (Salazar, 1970, Murrillo, 1971).

Differences in politicality, with Chicanos showing greater political awareness and a greater readiness to engage in militant forms of political action (Gutierrez and Hirsch, 1973).

Differences in ethnic prejudices, with Chicanos expressing greater ethnocentrism, greater prejudice against Anglos and greater acceptance of Blacks (Lampe, 1975).

Difference in degree of assimilation, with Chicanos being significantly less assimilated in identificational, behavior receptional, structural and overall assimilation (Lampe, 1978).

Psychological and identificational differences, with Chicanos expressing greater pride in their Indian and Spanish heritage, more anger and hostility, more ethnocentrism, more anti-assimilation sentiments, more anti-Anglo feelings, more militancy and anti-establishment attitudes, and greater alienation in all five major subtypes identified by Seeman (1959); normlessness, hopelessness, meaninglessness, self-estrangement and social isolation (Lampe, 1980).

The importance of an ethnic label was pointed out in a recent study. Contrary to what some may believe, a Mexican American is not a Mexican

American by any other name. When Black, Mexican American and Anglo respondents were asked to indicate the most appropriate descriptive terms for, among other ethnic groups, Mexican Americans and Chicanos it was found that less than one percent of the entire sample indicated that there was no difference between Chicanos and Mexican Americans. A significantly greater percentage of all respondents, Blacks, Anglos and especially Mexican Americans, described Chicanos more negatively than they did Mexican Americans (Lampe, 1982).

Problems of applicability of ethnic labels are not confined to the terms Hispanic and Chicano. There are some serious problems with virtually every label applied to Mexican Americans. Past terminology such as Latin American and Latino were, like Hispanic, much too broad. They both included people from many different nations, races and, perhaps more importantly, failed to differentiate between Americans or people living in the United States from foreigners who had absolutely nothing to do with the United States.

Spanish-speaking was a very confusing term. Not only is it very broad, as are the preceding terms, but, if taken literally, includes Anglos who speak Spanish and excludes Hispanics who do not speak Spanish. An equally undesirable descriptive term is Spanish-surnamed. This label has most of the previously mentioned problems plus one that is particularly disadvantageous when dealing with Mexican Americans. At a time when exogamous marriages involving Mexican Americans are increasing and showing signs of even greater increase in the future (Murguia and Cazares, 1982), only those offspring with a Spanish-surnamed father would be counted. Those with a Hispanic mother, but non-Spanish-surnamed father, would not be counted among the group members even though biologically they are similar to the former and there is reason to believe that in a

society wherein mothers are more important socializers of the young, they may be more Hispanic culturally. Unlike the above terms, Spanish American is by its nature relatively limited in scope. It signifies that the individuals referred to are Americans, thus excluding foreigners. Unfortunately, however, it has often been used in a rather loose way to apply to any individual who had some ancestral ties to Spain, no matter how remote. As such, it fails to distinguish between individuals whose nativity and nationality differ.

A label which is gaining popularity, at least among the members of the ethnic group, is Mexicano (San Antonio Light, 1982). This term is not without its problems for social scientists interested in the study of Mexican Americans. It would, of course, have an advantage over the former terms in that it would eliminate all non-Mexican origin Hispanics, but it would not distinguish between Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Nativity and primary socialization are important variables which cannot be overlooked. Use of a term which not only fails to distinguish between those who are Americans or consider themselves to be Americans from those who do not, but also between people who are living in the United States from those who are not, and may never have lived in the United States, is untenable.

This leaves the term Mexican American which, when referring to Americans with ancestral ties to Mexico, appears to be the best alternative. There are several reasons why Mexican American as a general ethnic designation is preferable. First, it is a simple, self-explanatory label which indicates the individuals referred to combine Mexican and American elements. Second, it is consistent with presently employed terminology which refers to other nationality and/or ethnic groups in the United States, such as Black Americans, Native Americans, Jewish

Americans, Irish Americans, etc. Third, it is a term already widely used. Hence, there is no need to introduce yet another term to the already extensive list. Finally, although not an essential consideration for scientific terminology, it is the ethnic designation most commonly accepted by members of the group themselves. Many terms have had regional popularity but, according to a recent survey, Mexican American has more general acceptance nationwide (San Antonio Light, 1982).

A Proposed Set of Designations

Certain distinctions are necessary to achieve an even higher level of accuracy and specificity with regards to Mexican Americans. In light of the noted importance of nativity, a distinction should be made between individuals in the United States of Mexican heritage who are born and raised in this country and those who are born and raised in Mexico. Only the former should be called Mexican Americans. The latter are Mexicans, although a useful distinction can and should be made here, also. Some individuals from Mexico come to this country, usually for economy reasons, planning to return to their homeland. Hence, they consider their stay to be only temporary. Their orientation and identification remain with Mexico and, therefore, they should be termed Mexicans regardless of the length of time they actually live in the United States. Other individuals leave Mexico to take up permanent residence in this country. As a result, their orientation and identification are more likely to undergo a change. They too should be called Mexicans, even though they may later become naturalized citizens. However, their Americanization should be acknowledged and they should be distinguished from the other Mexicans. Therefore, this category of individauls may fruitfully be called American Mexicans. This will allow them to be distinguished from both Mexicans

temporarily living in the United States and native-born Mexican Americans. At present no such distinctions exist.

The present critique of ethnic labels should not be viewed as a repudiation of the alternative designations but rather as a caveat regarding their proper use. Although none are suitable substitutes for the term Mexican American, each is appropriate for certain specific populations. Hispanic, for example, is certainly useful if referring to people of Spanish heritage in general. It refers to a people who share common cultural characteristics and, as such, cuts across racial and nationality lines. However, the term Latino has the broadest reference of all those under consideration. It includes not only Hispanics but also Portuguese, Brazilians, Italians, and possibly others. All other terms are subsets of this general population, with the possible exception of those designated Spanish-speaking. Latin American properly refers to those, not all of whom are Hispanic, from Latin America. It should be noted that since the United States is not part of Latin America, Mexican Americans are not Latin Americans, just as Italian Americans born in the United States are not Europeans. Mexicano, Spanish for Mexican, is a subset of Latin American referring to people from Mexico. In practice, however, it is often distinguished from Mexican citizenship and, hence, is used to refer to a cultural and biological heritage rather than a nationality. Thus, a person may consider himself/herself a Mexicano but not a Mexican. Spanish American is a subset of Hispanic and it specifies Americans whose ancestral homeland is Spain. The final term Chicano, which is routinely used by many social scientists, appears to be a subset of Mexican American. It should, therefore, be limited in its application to those individuals who self-identify as such. All the preceding terms, properly and consistently applied will do much to further the study of ethnic groups.

In conclusion, individuals may be able to utilize a variety of ethnic labels for themselves and others based on current popularity, prejudices or personal preferences, but social scientists cannot afford such a practice. Acceptance and utilization of a common terminology is essential for scientific advancement. Vagueness and/or ambiguity hinder both scientific research and understanding. Social scientists engaged in the study of Mexican Americans must, therefore, agree on a set of labels in order to facilitate comparisons and the accumulation of a body of knowledge. Whether the particular terminology proposed herein is accepted is irrelevant; however, it is imperative that some agreement be reached and a common terminology be adopted.

L A T I N O

HISPANIC (non-Latin American)	LATIN AMERICAN
1. MEXICAN AMERICAN	1. HISPANIC
a. CHICANO	a. MEXICANO
2. SPANISH AMERICAN	2. NON-HISPANIC

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